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Little Girls and the Players They Break: Classic Rock and Gender

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Classic rock can often have a hazy definition, with most agreeing that it consists of rock music from the 1960s through the 1980s, mostly of the more commercially successful songs that are easily recognizable today (the exact list of the songs and artists I used for my paper are on page 11). While spanning a relatively diverse period, many of the ways gender is presented convey the same messages regarding gender expectations and heterosexuality. The classic rock genre is usually stereotyped as a genre for fifty-year old white men or older who heard the music when originally released and listen to the music for enjoyment and to relive the glory days, but there are some people from the younger generations that are into classic rock (though at lower numbers, and from exposure to it by older relatives). Many classic rock radio stations are currently thriving, and older rock stars whose hits are part of the classic rock era still sell out concerts to older and younger alike. Regarding race, it is mostly thought of as a white interest, with fans of any other ethnicity seen as some sort of outlier. This is interesting in the fact that the larger genre of rock music spawned from like the blues and folk music and was originated by African American artists like the Godmother of Rock and Roll Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Chuck Berry. Unfortunately, the U.S. at large loved the sound of African American artists but mostly loved them *and* elevated them to 'classic' status if the sound was coming from white bands like the Rolling Stones (although there are some exceptions) (Hamilton, 2016). In fact, the list of classic rock songs that I compiled mostly from songs I already knew is predominantly white and male. Classic rock is also targeted more towards men, with most of the artists being male and singing about male conquests and of women as objects to be obtained for sex and status. Despite this, there are many female fans and artists, with Stevie Nicks and the band Heart being two examples of easily recognizable names.

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What is often depicted in the classic rock genre is heterosexual sex and relationships. Gender is presented predominantly in the frame of heterosexual relationships, with male appeal being in rough, aggressive behavior and women solely in sexual appeal to men. Within relationships (long-term or one-night-stand type), women take a passive role to the active role of the men, whose sexuality is often depicted in a predatory manner. Male sexuality is a naturally uncontrollable force and women either are good enough to change a man into a faithful monogamous one or are cruelly holding them back from their natural urges. In this way, it reinforces long-standing gender stereotypes on the active-passive roles of men and women in relation to each other. The audience learns that male sexuality is predatory, uncontrollable, and almost a force of nature, and that women are passively along for the ride while simultaneously responsible for drawing the line for these uncontrollable men. While I myself enjoy this genre of music, I mainly chose it for my media analysis because the largest theme is what I would change about it if possible: the painting of male (hetero)sexuality as an unstoppable force that women are in charge of placing the boundaries on, along with the predatory language relating to men's attraction to women that is dismissive of female consent and mutual enjoyment. I would also change the constant presence of the 'player' stereotype that paints the man with many female lovers as the utmost form of masculinity, which is harmful to both men and women. Through my analysis, I found these main themes present in my chosen songs.

The first theme previously mentioned is the active versus passive agent in a relationship (be it a one-night stand or a long-standing relationship). In song after song involving a heterosexual relationship (which is practically all of them), the man chases and gets what he wants while the woman is along for the ride. Through this, a specific type of man is painted as the more desirable and higher up on the hierarchy: the man that is aggressive, self-assured,

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rough, and can get any woman. This form of hegemonic masculinity associates the dominant male with “toughness, force, and heterosexual prowess” (Duncanson, 2015). Men are supposed to want to be this and women are supposed to desire this in their subjugation as women. A very specific example is “I’m No Angel,” by Gregg Allman, where through the entire song he is detailing the type of man he is to a woman: “no [he’s] no angel/No [he’s] no stranger to the street/[He’s got [his] label/So [he] won’t crumble at your feet...So [he’s] got scars upon [his] cheek/And [he’s] half crazy” (Palmer & Colton, 1987). Men are desired as rough, experienced, strong, etc. In the same theme but from another viewpoint, Heart performs “Magic Man” from the female viewpoint, where “[she] was not so strong” and “could not run away it seemed” from the magic man she met (Wilson & Wilson, 1975). A direct comparison is made between men’s active roles within heterosexual relationships and natural forces in Pat Benatar’s “Heartbreaker,” where she sings of a “love...like a tidal wave, spinning over [her] head” that is “the right kind of dreamer, to release [her] inner fantasy” (Gill & Wade, 1979), along with Scorpion’s “Rock You Like a Hurricane,” where “the wolf is hungry, he runs the show” and he will “Rock you like a hurricane” (Schenker et al., 1984), both portraying male sexuality as out of the man’s control and a natural urge. The active role of male sexuality is seen as a key unlocking a woman’s sexuality, which she apparently cannot or is not allowed to do herself. She is “taught...the ways of desire” by a man, implying that sexuality in men is natural and must be taught to women or done to them by men (Gill & Wade, 1979). This is also a subtle nod to the gendered expectations about sexuality and enjoyment: women are discouraged from explicit statements of enjoyment of sex, and this can be learned very early through experiences like being “reprimanded for...active engagement with sex education” (García, 2009) in high school. Male heterosexuality and desire is also portrayed as an overpowering natural force that is done to women in “I’m on Fire” (Bruce

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Springsteen), where “sometimes it’s like someone took a/knife, baby, edgy and dull/and cut a six-inch valley through the/middle of [his] skull...at night [he wakes] up with the sheets/soaking wet/and a freight train running through the/middle of [his] head” (Springsteen, 1985). He also asks, “Can he do to you the things that I can do?”, repeating the message that sex and male sexuality is something ‘done to’ women, instead of a conversation of mutual enjoyment. It is also a message of male possession of women, particularly women that the male finds sexually appealing (“I need to make you mine” (Call & Keller, 1981), “You’ve got to be all mine, all mine...I’ve made up my mind...I’m comin’ to get ya” (Hendrix, 1966), “I wanna tell ya, pretty baby/What I see I’ll make my own” (Thorogood, 1982), “Down to me, the change has come/She’s under my thumb” (Jagger & Richards, 1966)). Through this music, men and women who are interested in entering relationships with one another are offered a script for their relationships, and the fact that this active-passive possession theme is common among many different forms of media means it has become “shared, ‘common’ knowledge” that we use “to coordinate our behavior with...other” people (Ridgeway, 2009). Through relationships, we obtain the things we need and/or desire, and the framework of gender provides the listener with ways they should act along with how to expect other certain types of people to act, like the traditional view of courtship where the man takes initiative to ask out and transport the woman to dates (Ridgeway, 2009). The issue with this particular script of male heterosexuality is easily evident in the following paragraph on its intensified, more overt examples.

The active-passive relationship between men and women that is often portrayed in classic rock often becomes exaggerated, through the aforementioned comparison between natural forces and male sexuality as well as through outright predatory language used by men towards women. Heart singing about how they “could not run away it seemed” uses language of a cornered

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animal in reference to the woman's experience (Wilson & Wilson, 1975). In "Jane," Jefferson Starship literally paints it "Like a cat and a mouse (cat and a mouse)/From door to door and house to house" (Frieberg et al., 1979). The predatory behavior can even be in the subtle suggestion of what a female listener or receiver of male attention may be feeling in response, such as the assurance that "[he] won't do you no harm, no" and that "[he's] made up [his] mind" and "[he's] comin/ to get ya" (Hendrix, 1966). This normalizes the possible fear women feel at these predatory behaviors displayed by men, painting it as something normal to experience in a sexual/romantic relationship with a man. The woman "way down inside...[needs] it" and the man is "gonna give [her his] love" (Bonham et al., 1969), almost implying that the man knows what the woman truly wants, an aspect of rape culture where men are taught to believe that a woman's explicit refusal is not to be taken seriously. In fact, one of the creepiest songs is often misinterpreted as a love song: "Every move you make/Every vow you break/Every smile you fake/Every claim you stake/I'll be watching you" (Sting, 1983). Through lyrics, movies, and other forms of media, "culture...normalizes and often encourages male power and aggression, particularly within the context of heterosexual relationships" (Hlavka, 2014). This normalization of male aggressive sexuality has deep and extreme consequences in our society, including things like women being "expected to endure aggression by men" (Hlavka, 2014), and men learning that they will not face consequences for things like sexual harassment and assault because it is taught as a natural and uncontrollable part of them. A possibly even more alarming form of the predatory language is the use of "little girl" to refer to a woman who is of interest to the man. This is common even outside of classic rock: like the label of "Girl Power", which simultaneously is supposed to empower yet avoids using any strong or threatening language, or a grown man simply referring to a grown woman as "girl," when being referred to as "boy" would

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be emasculating. Through the use of “little girl,” male singers are establishing themselves as the dominant person in the relationship and setting themselves up as the woman’s superior. This compulsory heterosexuality in the disturbing use of “little girl” shows “the conventional norms of heterosexual relations produce and often require male dominance and female subordination” (Hlavka, 2014). This is seen over and over again: “What’s your name, little girl?” (Rossington & Van Zant, 1977), “so caught up in you, little girl” (Barnes et al., 1982), etc. In “Magic Man,” Heart sings about the experience of a woman being entranced by an older man, illustrating the common phenomenon of age gaps in heterosexual relationships with the man being the older partner. This phenomenon is the result of such messages in media like this music and like actresses being decades younger than the actor that they are playing the romantic partner of, along with the obsession with female youth through hair removal, anti-aging cosmetics, etc. Considering how many classic rock stars have had inappropriate contact with uncomfortably young or outright underage female fans, maybe the “little girl” part is supposed to be taken literally. The most alarming example is in Bruce Springsteen’s “I’m on Fire,” where he sings “Hey little girl, is your daddy home?/Did he go and leave you all alone?/I got a bad desire” (Springsteen, 1985). I have attempted to research into the lyrics, and other than a possible fan theory/analysis stating that it’s a metaphor for a woman whose growth and happiness is stunted by a restrictive lover (the “daddy”), I have been unable to find more of an explanation.

When do women have control? This question composes two themes at once - the theme of the player and the role of women in the relationship with the player. The only way men are passive in a relationship is in his (possible) change from a ‘player’ to a man in a monogamous relationship (like the player that has “[broken] a thousand hearts/Before [he] met you/[He’ll] break a thousand more, baby/Before [he is] through” (Thorogood, 1982)). While most songs that

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feature men changing seemingly show it in a positive light, the language surrounding their past player status compared to their new dedication to a serious heterosexual relationship does not quite match this positive attitude: “So caught up in you, little girl/that I never want to get myself free” (Barnes et al., 1982), “But then I fooled around and fell in love....Free, on my own is the way I used to be” (Bishop, 1976). The women sing about their experiences with this phenomenon, too: “Now, here you go again/You say, you want your freedom/Well, who am I to keep you down” (Nicks, 1977), “You’re begging me to go/Then making me stay/Why do you hurt me so bad/It would help me to know/Do I stand in your way/Or am I the best thing you’ve had” (Knight & Chapman, 1983). The man outside of a serious heterosexual relationship and is embracing and succeeding in the player field is synonymous with freedom (the ideal male in this culture’s masculinity hierarchy), and the only thing that can make him change or want to change is a woman that is good enough. The women that experience this expectation to be the ‘right kind of woman’ to change the ‘natural’ desire of the man to play the field experience confusion in which type of woman they are currently being to the man (“Do I stand in your way/Or am I the best thing you’ve had” (Knight & Chapman, 1983)). The ‘power’ that women have in this situation is not truly power: the man is really in charge of his own behavior, but it is the woman’s responsibility if he is dedicated to the relationship or not. The woman can only watch him go and give a warning of what he might experience without her (“but listen carefully, to the sound/of your loneliness” (Nicks, 1977)). This expectation of women to be the one responsible for the success of a heterosexual relationship is a common gender expectation that we are taught from a young age through almost all media outlets, especially in media specifically for girls, like the teenage girls’ magazines where boys are depicted as “highly sexual...and emotionally inexpressive” (Firminger, 2006). The contrast between the previously discussed active

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expectation of men in these relationships and this expectation of women as the one responsible for relationship success and changing a man is possibly due to the gendered division of heterosexual relationships, with the men being active in the sexual aspect (enjoyment, initiation) and women being active in the romantic aspect of the relationship and “obligated to set limits for sexual behavior” (Hlavka, 2014), since men are deemed unable to do so for themselves. This is echoed in the representation of men in other media as well, like the teenage girls’ magazines representation of boys involving the “splitting of intimacy from sexuality” and the girl being responsible for setting the boundaries for the boy’s sexuality and developing intimacy with him through her behavior and choices (Firminger, 2006). Through being responsible for setting these boundaries, girls and women are also taught that if anything goes wrong, all the fault lies on them (a common rape culture message). Women learn early on from magazines, songs, and movies that happiness is a successful heterosexual relationship of her own making and being enough of a woman to keep a man. Even with this control in the relationship, Pat Benatar’s lyrics in “Love is a Battlefield” seems to illustrate that even in this aspect women are relatively powerless (“But I’m trapped by your love/And I’m chained to your side” (Knight & Chapman, 1983)). Leaving a relationship is clearly another aspect of control that men are posed as positively wielding. In fact, in many of the most successful more serious songs, the singer is a man bemoaning the fact that his woman left him. The pain and anguish the men portray is often severe, painting the woman as the sadistic villain. While the ideal male image is aggressive and assertive, classic rock does allow for other forms of emotional expression in men in the form of these songs. It might be more acceptable *because* the songs allow the (male) listener to feel the feelings that are often denied by his culture’s definition of ‘manliness’ through this deemed-appropriate outlet; some of the songs even reference the rigid emotional boundaries on men: “I

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know a man ain't supposed to cry/But these tears I can't hold inside/Losin' you would end my life you see" (Whitfield & Strong, 1970). The more traditional and acceptable masculine component might be in the common theme of heavy drinking and self-harm: "I'm gonna take a freight train, down at the station/I don't care where it goes/Gonna climb me a mountain, the highest mountain/Jump off, nobody gonna know" (Caldwell, 1973). Through this you see the promoted ideal of male aggression turned inward and onto the aggressor themselves.

Through these themes the common message of compulsive heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity are upheld and continued. The parroting of "the conventional norms of heterosexual relations [producing] and often [requiring] male dominance and female subordination" is seen in the language of the active and aggressive male sexual force and the passive female recipient, along with the at times disturbing use of "little girl" to refer to the female of sexual interest (Duncanson, 2015). It is also seen in the predatory language of male sexuality, describing them as uncontrollable animals when it comes to their (hetero)sexuality and putting the onus of a man's faithfulness on the woman's shoulders. Through these messages, men learn what type of man is at the top of the masculinity hierarchy and women learn what is expected of them and what to expect from relationships with men, providing a limiting and unfulfilling script that can cause a difficult gender barrier and confusion in a relationship. These messages also continue the harmful rape culture that excuses predatory sexual behavior from men as a natural occurrence and the confusing message of what should be considered attractive in men at the same time being harmful behavior that the woman is ultimately blamed for (a man's aggression, sexuality, dominance, etc.).

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Songs Used in Analysis

1. "I'm No Angel"-Gregg Allman
2. "Magic Man"-Heart
3. "Heartbreaker"-Pat Benatar
4. "Rock You Like a Hurricane"-Scorpions
5. "I'm On Fire"-Bruce Springsteen
6. "867-5309/Jenny"-Tommy Tutone
7. "Foxy Lady"-Jimi Hendrix
8. "Bad to the Bone"-George Thorogood and the Destroyers
9. "Under My Thumb"-The Rolling Stones
10. "Jane"-Jefferson Starship
11. "Whole Lotta Love"-Led Zeppelin
12. "Every Breath You Take"-the Police
13. "What's Your Name"-Lynyrd Skynyrd
14. "Caught Up in You"-38 Special
15. "Fooled Around and Fell in Love"-Elvin Bishop
16. "Dreams"-Fleetwood Mac
17. "Love is a Battlefield"-Pat Benatar
18. "Heard it Through the Grapevine"-Creedence Clearwater
19. "Can't You See"-Marshall Tucker Band
20. "Barracuda"-Heart
21. "Take It Easy"-Eagles
22. "Start Me Up"-The Rolling Stones

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